DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 235 408 CG 016 941

AUTHOR Jacobsen, Rebecca H.; Calhoun, James F.
TITLE Causal Attributions and Person Perceptions in an Incident of Spouse Abuse.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 83
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (29th, Atlanta, GA, March 23-26, 1983). For related document, see CG 016 942. Some tables are marginally legible.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; *Attribution Theory; *Battered Women; Bias; College Students; Counseling Techniques; Empathy; Family Problems; *Group Discussion; Higher Education; Observation; *Role Playing; Sex Differences; Spouses
IDENTIFIERS *Person Perception; *Situational Variables

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that observers of spouse abuse are likely to arrive at overly dispositional causal explanations for the abusive behavior, and reject both the abusing spouse and his victim. To examine observers' causal attributions and person perceptions under varying conditions, 160 college students read a vignette about an incident of spouse abuse in which the abuser either made a sincere apology and sought help, or only left a brief note. Subjects answered questions about their causal attributions and perceptions of the abuser and the victim; and then either role played the abuser and victim in a discussion after the fight, or engaged in a group discussion of the incident. Subjects then completed another questionnaire. There were no consistent differences found with respect to sex or the sex composition of the group. The results suggested that people viewed a spouse abuser less negatively and made more situational causal attributions about his behavior when he took positive steps to seek help. Both discussing the abuser's behavior in a group or role playing him led to more causal attributions, but that may have been more true for the role plays. (JAC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED235408

Causal Attributions and Person Perceptions in an Incident of Spouse Abuse

Rebecca H. Jacobsen, Ph.D.
V.A. Medical Center
Augusta, Georgia

James F. Calhoun, Ph.D.
University of Georgia

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, Georgia - March 24, 1983

C6 015941

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James F. Calhoun

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Previous research suggests that observers of an incident of spouse abuse are likely to arrive at overly dispositional causal explanations for the abusive behavior, and that the observer is likely to derogate and socially reject both the abusing spouse and his victim. Such reactions may be in opposition to the goal of helping partners in an abusive relationship to break their cycle of abusive interactions. In this study, observers' causal attributions and person perceptions concerning an incident of spouse abuse were examined under varying conditions. The attempt was made to alter these perceptions in ways that might have implications for the clinical problem of spouse abuse.

Several areas of research suggest that the spouse abuse situation is one in which people are likely to arrive at faulty causal attributions and perceptions of individuals involved. One is the actor-observer effect suggested by Jones and Nisbett in 1971. They observed that "actors" tend to interpret the cause of their behavior in terms of the situation. "Observers," however, tend to explain the behavior in terms of causes internal to the actor, e.g., to the actor's disposition or personal characteristics. Observers of a spouse abuse situation would therefore be likely to arrive at overly dispositional explanations for the incident. While both actors' and observers' perceptions are biased (Monson and Snyder, 1981), actors' attributions are thought to be more accurate in general, because of the greater amount of information available to the actor concerning both internal and situational factors. Further, McArthur (1972) and Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Marecek (1973) found that observers tend to expect the same behavior in the future, even when the actor does not.

However, many studies (Aderman, Brehm, and Katz, 1974; Brehm and Aderman, 1977; Galper, 1976; Regan and Totten, 1972; and Wegner and Finstuen, 1977) have shown that when observers can be induced to empathize with an actor, or take the actor's point of view, causal explanations of a more situational nature can be evoked. It has been suggested that the most accurate and least biased attributions might be achieved when an individual can experience both points of view.

Other research suggests that when an individual seeks help for a problem behavior, that individual will receive more derogation and social rejection when the behavior is seen as due to personality, as opposed to situational factors (Calhoun, Pierce, Walters, and Dawes, 1974; Calhoun, Selby, and Wroten, 1977; Coie, Pennington and Buckley, 1974). Tessler and Schwartz (1972) present data which suggests that individuals are more likely to seek help when they can attribute their troubles to situational factors. And Phillips (1963) found that individuals described as exhibiting identical disturbed behaviors were increasingly rejected as a function of the source from which help was sought, with the least rejection occurring when the individual sought no help at all.

We may conclude that the spouse abuser is likely to receive derogation and rejection when he seeks help for his problem. He will tend to be viewed negatively and will be expected to continue his abusive behavior in the future. Such attitudes are likely to discourage spouse abusers from seeking or utilizing professional help.

The victim of spouse abuse is also likely to receive derogation, rejection, and overly dispositional causal attributions concerning her situation. Heider (1958) observed that people tend to blame and reject

the victim of a misfortune. Lerner and Simmons (1966) suggested that this is because people have a need to believe in a "just world". However, Aderman et al (1974) showed that the tendency of observers to derogate unfortunate victims can sometimes be reversed by inducing the observer to empathize with the victim.

Other research has shown that when an individual has harmed someone, the persecutor may devalue his victim (Davis and Jones, 1960; Glass, 1964; Lerner, 1965). By believing that the victim deserved to be harmed, the persecutor can justify his behavior.

In this study four factors were examined for their impact on observer's causal attributions and person perceptions concerning an incident of spouse abuse: (1) sex of subject, (2) sex composition of subject group, (3) type of apology offered by the abusing husband, and (4) empathy (a role play and role reversal condition was compared with a group discussion).

Subjects were 160 college undergraduates who were run in 16 groups in a fully crossed design. Subjects first read a vignette about an incident of spouse abuse, which had one of two endings. The "good" apology was given face to face, sounded sincere, and indicated that he had made an appointment at the local Community Mental Health Center to get help for his abusive behavior. The "poor" apology consisted of a brief note. The incident was a mild one in which an argument begins, escalates to the point where the couple is screaming and cursing, and finally the man (John) slaps the woman (Mary) forcefully across the face, knocking her to the floor, and storms out of the house. After the subjects read the story they filled out a questionnaire concerning their causal attributions, their

perceptions of John and their perceptions of Mary. Then either pairs of subjects role played John and Mary having a discussion after the fight, or subjects engaged in a group discussion. Subjects then completed the same questionnaire completed earlier plus a brief questionnaire containing some manipulation checks.

Four-way analyses of variance were performed on all of the pre- and post-test questions. Four-way multivariate ANOVAS were performed on the following groups of questions: (1) four questions on causal attributions, (2) three questions on empathy with John, (3) three questions on empathy with Mary, (4) eleven questions on derogation of John, (5) eleven questions on derogation of Mary, (6) four questions on social rejection of John, and (7) four questions on social rejection of Mary. There was also one question on the subjects' perception of the psychological disturbance of John and one on the psychological disturbance of Mary. All questions were rated on Likert Scales. Univariate and multivariate repeated measures analyses of variance were computed on the pre- and post-treatment data.

Intercorrelations were computed to insure that questions grouped together were measuring the same thing. All groups of questions were sufficiently interrelated with the exception of the causal attribution questions. There was no relationship between situational causal attribution and dispositional causal attribution.

There were no consistent differences found with respect to sex or sex composition of the group, and these results will not be discussed further.

It was hypothesized that subjects reading the good apology would empathize more with John, make more situational causal attributions, and

have more positive perceptions of him than would subjects who read the poor apology. It was also hypothesized that subjects who role played would make more situational causal attributions and have more positive perceptions of both John and Mary than would subjects who engaged in a group discussion.

SLIDE I

Table I shows the subjects' empathy with John and Mary before and after treatment. Overall, subjects empathized more with Mary than they did with John. There was a highly significant increase in empathy with John after treatment ($p < .0001$), but the type of treatment did not matter. There appears to be a decrease in empathy with Mary after treatment, but it did not reach significance on the MANOVA.

SLIDE 2

Table 2 shows the subjects' derogation of John and Mary before and after treatment. Again, overall subjects derogated John more than they did Mary. There was a trend, $F(11,144)=1.72$, ($p < .07$), for subjects to derogate John less after treatment, but again the type of treatment made no difference. Mary, on the other hand, received significantly more derogation after treatment, $F(11,144)=4.0$, $p < .0001$. But a highly significant treatment by time interaction, $F(11,144)=3.32$, $p < .005$, showed that this was only true for the group discussions.

SLIDE 3

Table 3 shows the subjects' social rejection of John and Mary, before and after treatment. Again it appears that subjects were more rejecting of John than they were of Mary. There was significantly less rejection of John after treatment, $F(4,154)=10.99$, $p<.001$, and again the type of treatment made no difference. There was more rejection of Mary after treatment, which was a highly, $F(4,154)=5.13$, $p<.0007$, significant difference. But a nearly significant, $F(4,154)=2.12$, $(p<.08)$, treatment X time interaction suggested that this was more true for the group discussions than for the role plays.

SLIDE 4

Table 4 presents the subjects' perception of psychological disturbance of John and Mary before and after treatment for the group discussion and role play treatments. A nearly significant time X treatment interaction, $F(1,158)=2.88$, $(p<.09)$ suggests that subjects in the role plays saw John as less disturbed after treatment, while subjects in the group discussions saw him as more disturbed. The same interaction was found for Mary, and this difference was significant, $F(1,157)=7.94$, $(p<.005)$.

SLIDE 5

The means for derogation of John with the good and poor apologies are presented in this table. There was more derogation of John with the

poor apology, a difference that was significant on seven of the eleven derogation items. This difference was highly significant on the MANOVA, $F(11,130)=3.56)$, $p < .0002$.

SLIDE 6

Table 6 presents the data on the causal attribution items after treatment with the good and poor apologies. Subjects made more situational causal attributions and blamed John less with the good apologies, but they did not attribute less dispositional causation to his actions. This difference was nevertheless significant on the MANOVA, $F(4,125)=3.51$, $p < .009$. Interestingly, this difference was not found in the pre-treatment data, suggesting that the treatment caused more situational causal attributions, but only when the subjects had read the good apology.

SLIDE 7

Table 7 shows the changes from pre- to post-treatment on causal attribution for the role play and group discussion treatments. A multivariate repeated measures analysis showed that subjects made more situational causal attributions after treatment, $F(4,156)=2.83$, $(p < .03)$. A nearly significant, $F(4,156)=2.06$, $(p < .09)$, treatment X time interaction suggested that this might be more true for the role play than for the group discussion treatment.

Conclusions:

These results suggest that people will view a spouse abuser less negatively and make more situational causal attributions concerning his

behavior when he takes positive steps to seek help. However, they still see him as psychologically disturbed and there is still some social rejection.

Both discussing the spouse abuser's behavior in a group or role playing him led to more situational causal attributions in this study, but this may have been more true for the role plays than for the group discussions.

Finally, the group discussion may have been causing people to "take sides." After the group discussion, subjects were more derogating and rejecting towards Mary. The role play, on the other hand, seems to have allowed subjects to view the situation from both sides, and as was suggested earlier, perhaps to arrive at more accurate causal attributions and more positive perceptions of both persons involved.

References

Aderman, D., Brehm, S. S., and Katz, L. B. Empathic observation of an innocent victim: The just world revisited. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1974, 29, 342-347.

Brehm, S. S., and Aderman, D. On the relationship between empathy and the actor versus observer hypothesis. Journal of Research in Personality, 1977, 11, 340-346.

Calhoun, L. G., Peirce, J. R., Walters, S., and Dawes, A. S. Determinants of social rejection for help seeking: Locus of causal attribution, help source, and the "mental illness" label. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1974, 42, 618.

Calhoun, L. G., Selby, J. W., and Wroten, J. D. Situational constraint and type of causal explanation: The effects of perceived "mental illness" and social rejection. Journal of Research in Personality, 1977, 11, 95-100.

Coie, J. D., Pennington, B. F. and Buckley, H. H. Effects of situational stress and sex roles on the attribution of psychological disorder. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 1974, 42, 559-568.

Davis, K. E., and Jones, E. E. Changes in interpersonal perception as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1960, 61, 402-410.

Galper, R. E. Turning observers into actors: Differential causal attributions as a function of "empathy". Journal of Research in Personality, 1976, 10, 328-335.

Glass, D. C. Changes in liking as a means of reducing cognitive discrepancies between self-esteem and aggression. Journal of Personality, 1964, 32, 531-549.

Heider, F. The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations. New York: Wiley, 1958.

Jones, E. E. and Nisbett, R. E. The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior. Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1971.

Lerner, M. J. The effect of responsibility and choice on a partner's attractiveness following failure. Journal of Personality, 1965, 33, 178-187.

Lerner, M. J., and Simmons, C. H. Observers' reaction to the "innocent victim": Compassion or rejection? Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1966, 4, 203-210.

Nisbett, R. E., Caputo, C., Legant, P., and Marecek, J. Behavior as seen by the actor and as seen by the observer. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1973, 27, 154-164.

McArthur, L. A. The how and what of why: Some determinants and consequences of causal attribution. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 22, 171-193.

Monson, T. C., and Snyder, M. Actors, observers, and the attribution process: Toward a reconceptualization. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1977, 13, 89-111.

Phillips, D. L. Rejection: A possible consequence of seeking help for mental disorders. American Sociological Review, 1963, 28, 963-972.

Regan, D. T., and Lotten, J. Empathy and attribution: Turning observers into actors. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1975, 32, 850-856.

Tessler, R. C., and Schwartz, S. H. Help seeking, self-esteem and achievement motivation: An attributional analysis. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 21, 318-326.

Wegner, D. M., and Finstuen, K. Observer's focus of attention in the simulation of self-perception. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1977, 35, 56-62.

Table 1

Mean Empathy With John and Mary

Question	Pre-Treatment		Post-Treatment	
	John	Mary	John	Mary
Overall "Empathy"	2.39	3.85	3.93	3.18
Cognitive Empathy	3.13	3.92	3.49	3.08
Affective Empathy	2.75	3.99	3.64	3.09

Note: Larger values indicate greater empathy.

Table 2

Mean Derogation of John and Mary

Question	Pre-Treatment		Post-Treatment	
	John	Mary	John	Mary
Cold/Warm	4.91	3.71	4.42	3.10
Kind/Cruel	5.57	4.55	5.48	4.84
Bad/Good	4.48	3.33	4.34	5.39
Unfair/Fair	5.27	3.99	3.83	4.66
Strong/Weak	5.31	5.27	5.35	5.71
Dangerous/Safe	5.41	2.21	8.88	6.38
Flexible/Inflexible	6.20	5.42	6.18	5.56
Sensitive/Insensitive	5.83	4.74	5.42	5.06
Immature/Mature	5.81	4.18	3.35	4.29
Likeable/Unlikeable	5.51	4.33	5.40	4.42
Responsible/irresponsible	5.74	5.00	5.71	5.13

Note: Some items have been rescored. Larger values indicate more derogation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 3

Mean Social Rejection of John and Mary

Question	Pre-Treatment		Post-Treatment	
	John	Mary	John	Mary
Unwilling to have John/Mary live next door	3.87	2.09	3.45	2.44
Have John on baseball team / Mary in book club	4.36	2.69	3.81	2.69
Discourage child from marrying someone like John/Mary	4.81	2.80	8.86	3.18
Go fishing with John/ shopping with Mary	4.30	3.06	3.88	2.93

Note: Larger values indicate more social rejection.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 4

Psychological Disturbance of John and Mary

		Pre-Treatment	Post-Treatment	
John				
	Role Play	4.89	4.53	Treatment X Time
	Discussion	4.98	5.07	$p < .092$
Mary				
	Role Play	3.44	3.05	Treatment X Time
	Discussion	3.56	3.92	$p < .01$

Note; Larger values indicate greater perceived psychological disturbance.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table # 5

Means for Derogation of John with the Good and Poor Apologies (Pre-Treatment)

	Good Apology	Poor Apology	
Question	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$	F
Cold/Warm	3.99	4.83	9.95**
Kind/Cruel	5.17	5.98	10.45**
Bad/Good	4.00	4.97	19.57***
Unfair/Fair	4.84	5.70	10.31**
Strong/Weak	5.28	5.34	.93
Dangerous/Safe	5.20	5.69	1.92
Flexible/Inflexible	5.71	6.69	13.03***
Sensitive/Insensitive	5.42	6.24	5.66*
Immature/Mature	5.68	5.94	.86
Likeable/Unlikeable	5.08	5.94	16.08***
Responsible/Irresponsible	5.61	5.88	1.21

* $p<.05$

** $p<.01$

*** $p<.001$

Note: Some items have been rescored. Larger values indicate more derogation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 6

Means for Causal Attribution with the Good and Poor Apologies at Post-Treatment

Question	Good Apology $\bar{X}$	Poor Apology $\bar{X}$	F
Situational	5.62	4.94	5.10*
Dispositional	6.46	6.93	2.88
Dispositional vs Situational	5.07	4.22	12.17***
Blame Mary vs Blame John	5.49	6.21	4.79*

* $p < .05$

*** $p < .001$

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table # 7

Changes From Pre- to Post-Treatment on Causal Attribution for the Role Play and Group Discussion Conditions

	Pre-Treatment	Post-Treatment
Question	$\bar{X}$	$\bar{X}$
Situational		
Role Play	4.95	5.50
Discussion	5.27	5.08
Dispositional		
Role Play	6.52	6.63
Discussion	6.90	6.73
Dispositional vs. Situational		
Role Play	4.68	4.77
Discussion	4.45	4.53
Blame Mary vs. Blame John		
Role Play	6.22	6.00
Discussion	6.28	5.70

BEST COPY AVAILABLE